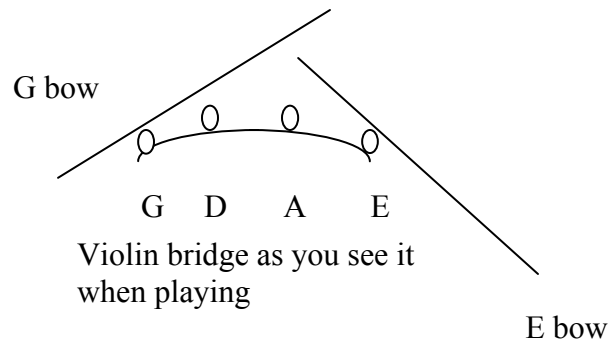




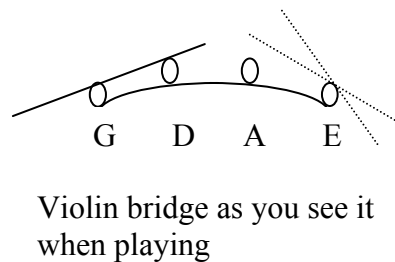
Learning to use the fiddle bow Part Two

**By
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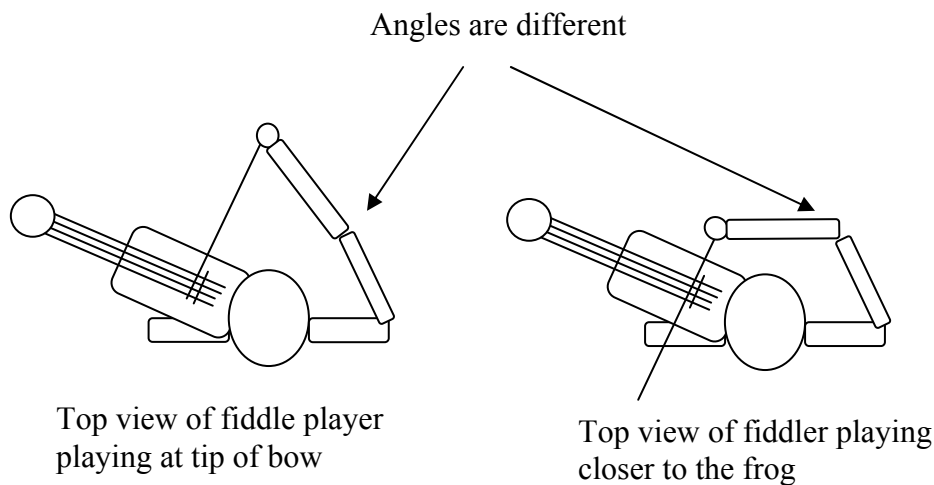
If pressure, bow speed, lane, and the amount of hair weren't enough to consider when playing, another factor has to do with angle. Like a compound miter in wood working, there are two angles that are simultaneously significant: the angle of the arm in relation to one's side which is determined by which string or combination of strings is being played, and the angle of one's elbow (there are some wrist and shoulder factors but they are somewhat less significant) based on whether one is playing at the frog, in the middle of the bow, or at the tip.



First, the angle of bow to play the G string by itself is different from the angle of bow required to play the E string. Try it: you'll find your elbow in the air (greater angle from your arm to your side) to play the G string and a smaller angle to play the E string—your arm will be closer to your side.



Suppose you say, “Fine. I won’t just play on one string—I’m a fiddler and I’ll play on two strings.” The above graphic demonstrates that you have more acceptable angles for playing on a single string (the E string above) than for playing on any two strings where the bow has to contact both strings. So being a fiddler is **HARDER** than being a violinist in most cases!!



The other half of the “compound miter” has to do with the angle of the elbow depending on whether one is playing at the frog, at the tip, or somewhere in the middle. In fact, this angle is slightly different for every millimeter of the bow. The compound miter also changes not only for every millimeter of the bow but also in terms of which string or combination of strings is being played.

To summarize:

Element	Result/control
Pressure	Loudness, softness, harshness, crunchiness, depending on lane and bow speed. Controlled by torque in wrist and/or lifting weight of hand.
Hair	Loudness, softness, quality of sound. Controlled by tipping wood of bow toward fingerboard or making hair flat on strings.
Lane	Loudness, softness, harshness, crunchiness in concert with pressure and bow speed. Controlled by keeping a consistent distance between the bow and the bridge (while keeping the bow parallel to the bridge).
Bow speed	Quality of sound in concert with pressure and lane.
Angle of bow on bridge	Determines which string or combination of strings is being played. Controlled by angle of elbow in relation to side of body.
Angle of elbow	Determines where on the bow one is playing (frog, tip, middle). Controlled by angle of elbow (with some shoulder and wrist near the frog and some wrist near the tip)

The purpose of this is not to discourage you; rather, this demonstrates that the undertaking of playing the fiddle is not easy—no wonder it’s hard to get that good sound you want so much. No wonder the cat slinks away when you pick up the instrument! The other good news in all this is that taking apart these elements suggests some effective practice techniques.

Practicing bowing

First off, it would be worth some practice time just playing with the elements outlined above to see how they work on your instrument. Each instrument is different and different brands of strings have different tolerances. For example, all metal strings such as Super Sensitive or Prims tend to be stiffer and can take more pressure. Perlon-centered strings such as Helicores get crunchy very easily with too much pressure.

Secondly, the classic way of learning new things is to work on one element at a time. Try out pressure. Practice tilting the wood of your bow toward the fingerboard as you near the frog and making sure all the hair is on the string as you play near the tip. Try out bow speed and make sure you are aware of the compound miter.

Notice I didn't say anything about lane. That is because there is an extremely effective way of practicing that helps with lane and with the angle of your elbow in particular. But it's kind of maddening at first: play while monitoring your bow in a mirror. It is very difficult to make sure your bow is parallel to the bridge just by watching without the mirror because the bridge is too close to your eyes for them to work properly. The mirror allows you to use the whole bow and make sure you are always parallel to the bridge. The bonus is that if the bow is parallel, then you will automatically do the elbow angle correctly and if you listen to the string you are playing, then you will also learn how to incorporate the angle of the bow on the bridge. It takes awhile to learn how to make adjustments when the image in front of you is backwards, but you will soon get used to this. If you will play long notes on just open strings while watching in the mirror and listening for good tone, you will be doing one of the most effective practice techniques ever invented.

Real world

Now while it is really good to practice in front of a mirror, playing long open strings and combinations of strings loses its fun factor pretty quickly. You want to play tunes, of course.

The secret to playing with the best sound you are capable of producing when you are a relative beginner is to play reels, hoe downs, jigs, and other reasonably fast tunes, making sure you are using the middle inch or two of your bow, in the middle lane (kind of like driving on the freeway). The middle of the bow is the easiest part to play nicely, and short bows (no more than two inches) are easier to control and make sound good. Focus on playing these tunes with as nice a sound as you can muster for those two inches of the bow and be sure you play in the same two inches each time. You can put two pieces of tape on the wood of your bow two inches apart to mark the beginning and end of the middle of where you want to bow. The reason it is important to work the same area of the bow is that this will help your brain to learn automatically how all those elements work together to make a good sound in that short space. As you become pretty good at making a nice sound in those two inches, move the tapes to the middle three inches of the bow and play slightly slower tunes. Eventually you will be able to make a nice sound across the length of the bow.

The violin bow is what makes the fiddle sing, and yet learning HOW to make the fiddle sing is what makes the learning curve of the fiddle so steep. As with any complex skill, breaking it down to understand its constituent parts and making intelligent choices about practicing will help you to master this skill.

bio

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